



# FIRST (SCOTS) SERMONS

## “WE CAN DANCE IF WE WANT TO”<sup>1</sup>

Scripture Lessons: 2 Samuel 6:1-19

*This sermon was preached by The Rev. Maggie F. Beamguard on Sunday, July 12, 2015  
at First (Scots) Presbyterian Church in Charleston, South Carolina.*

When was the last time you were invited to dance? Whether it is the chicken dance or the waltz, disco or shag, the two step or the up-town funk, ballet, tap, jazz or contemporary - dancing is: feeling the rhythm, moving to the beat, shaking it off, self-expression. But dancing is also about knowing who is leading and who is going to step where and when or turn first.

Once David becomes the King of Israel, he leads by uniting Saul's tribal confederation under one capitol in the newly captured city of Jerusalem. This will not only be a political hub, but a religious center. And so he arranges to bring the Ark of the Covenant to the city of David. For all these years the Ark of the Covenant has served as the chief symbol of God's presence and tribal unity in Israel.

The Ark is the symbol of God's presence with God's people going all the way back to days of Moses. The Ark journeys through the wilderness in Sinai and armies carry it into battle. But it also falls into the hands of enemies and is lost for stretches at a time. King David will bring this powerful symbol of God's presence to the new capitol.

King David choreographs its arrival, as any head of state would, as if a dignitary were coming to town. The military is mobilized, the fanfare arranged, along with proper security and provisions for a gathering crowd. 30,000 troops participate in the procession that will carry the Ark of the Covenant about six miles from its location to Jerusalem as the musicians and singers accompany the group. 30,000 troops, for your comparison, is 2,500 fewer people than ran the Bridge run last year.

The centerpiece, of course, is the Ark. It is riding in a brand new cart for the special occasion. The Ark of the Covenant, for its ride to Jerusalem has a new, ox pulled cart. Air bags, apparently, not included.

This is David's moment; it is Israel's moment. I mean, think of how far they have come: enslaved in Egypt, lost in the wilderness, conflicted in Canaan. Now, they are one people with one God in one city. There will be dancing in the streets.

But this is where things get weird. It is a difficult part of the story, but a part of the story that makes it compelling. Along the way, the oxen pulling the brand new cart stumble, the cart tips, and a man named Uzzah who had been caring for the Ark until now in his father's home, reflexively reaches out to steady it. As anyone would. This is a considerate, responsible action. We take care of important things.

The problem is that Uzzah is rewarded for this action by being struck dead by God.

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<sup>1</sup> This sermon title is from "The Safety Dance" by Men Without Hats, a Canadian New Wave Band. It was released in the U.S.A. in March 1983, peaking the Billboard at no.3. Lead singer, Ivan Doroschuk wrote the song in protest after he had been kicked out of a club for pogoing. This new wave style of solo dance was discouraged in clubs that long favored disco partner dancing. The artist considers the song a call for freedom of expression. [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The\\_Safety\\_Dance](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Safety_Dance)

This sounds like a Hollywood moment, a real Indiana Jones moment. And we are eager to explain this away as just the “angry Old Testament god,” or legend, or a convenient medical account for why a guy happened to die of a heart attack at the exact moment he touched the Ark.

The truth is, this is the first uncalculated, choreographed instant of the whole procession, and it is the first transparent instance of belief. Tom Long proposes that “a spontaneous gesture can reveal a universe.”<sup>2</sup> This one impulsive action reveals more about what is going on than all the choreography combined: “We sometimes reveal more of the truth about ourselves by what we do and say reflexively, spontaneously, than by our calculated statements and arranged positions.”

For example, shares Long, “A mother takes her two-year-old to visit the new neighbor who has just moved in down the street. After only a few minutes of getting acquainted, the child grows restless and begins to explore the room. The mother says, ‘Honey, don't bother things.’ To which the new neighbor responds, ‘Oh, don't worry about him. There's not a thing in this house he can hurt, and even if he did, they're just things. He's a lot more important than any old thing.’ Just at that instant, however, the child brushes up against a vase and tips it off the end table. The new neighbor lunges across the floor like a wide receiver, catching the vase a millimeter before destruction. ‘They're just things. . . .’ but, a spontaneous gesture reveals a universe.”<sup>3</sup>

So there is Uzzah, walking alongside the Ark of the Covenant. He believes in God, the God above all God's, who laid the foundations of the earth, whose majesty is beyond all thought. And yet, when the oxen stumble, Uzzah's real faith surfaces: a God so powerless that if the box falls, God falls, a feeble God trapped inside fragile religious symbols.

It is a cautionary tale for those of us who are apt to reach out to steady the Ark with gimmicks or packaged programs or slick promotions instead of sound theology, honest relationships and gospel truth. I'm as bothered by Uzzah's violent death as anyone. But maybe God whose presence and power are to be taken seriously, are more needed than a god who needs help staying upright.<sup>4</sup>

David shares our upset at this event. First he is angry, and then he is afraid.

For one thing, the whole, joyous parade is interrupted and sullied by this unfortunate event. All of this had been done to honor God, and now, God had struck dead one who had cared for the Ark for years. And everything is ruined.

David wants the Ark of the Covenant in Jerusalem with him, but with Uzzah dead, he halts the procession. David cannot bring the Ark to Jerusalem now. He cannot ensure the safety of his people or his own political authority. Best to reassess the situation. Maybe pray.

The critical moment comes when David asks, “How can the ark of the Lord come into my care?” If Uzzah's touch communicated his inner uncertainty about God's sovereignty, David's doubts about his own leadership and sovereignty as king are vocalized.

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<sup>2</sup> Long, Thomas G. "The Fall Of The House Of Uzzah...And Other Difficult Preaching Texts." *Journal For Preachers* 7.1 (1983): 13-19.

<sup>3</sup> Long.

<sup>4</sup> Long.

He realizes again the God of Abraham and Sarah, and Jacob and Rachel, and Moses and Miriam uses this Ark as a mere footstool. Who is he to provide care for God? Maybe it works the other way around? He retreats. The 30,000 go home. For three months the Ark of God stays in the house of Obed-edom. When it is deemed safe, because it blesses the house of Obed-edom, David returns for the ark.

This time he looks more like a priest than a king, going before the Ark rather than behind it, calling for animal sacrifices every six paces. He wears a linen ephod which is a priestly garment like an apron.

However, this is all he wears, leaving him rather exposed. Some say he is indecent, others, intimately before God. Whatever the meaning of his garment, he is . . . unconstrained. His anger and fear turn to joy. And he leaps and he dances.

The dance that David dances before the Ark of the Covenant when he finally leads it into Jerusalem is not a dance that he learned at Society Hall after they clean him up and wash the dirt out from under his nails from the fields. The dance that David dances before the Ark of the Covenant, the very seat of God, when he led it into Jerusalem, was one that no one taught him (well, no one of this earth, anyway).

It was learned in the grace of his fingers that glided across the harp he played, in the fibers of the muscles that twitched before Goliath, in the jump of his nerves as he hid from Saul, and the rhythm of the laughter of his friendship with Jonathan, and the strength of his bones as he grew from a shepherd to a king.

He dances the dance that God invites him to dance. This dance cannot be choreographed, canned or programmed. If it at any moment betrays any belief that it is a dance other than God's dance, we have been given a hint how it will turn out. This perhaps is why it seems so raw and honest.

It is so important that the King dance. And that the King dances like this: exposed, unconstrained, joy. How many leaders? How many faithful? Will go this far?

He will take the Ark of God into the City of David, and so he needs to keep his priorities crystal clear. It will not be easy.

After asking some serious questions about who God is and who he is, David has changed his whole approach to God. The King abandons himself to God in joy. David will let God take the lead, which means he does not have to know when and where to step or when to turn first.

So much of the David's first attempt to recognize God's presence among the people through the Ark was about the regime's control, the regime's choreography. But now, David surrenders to God. David's dance is the fullest expression of gratitude for God. He dances, to use the well-worn phrase, like no one is watching. At least, no one but God.

But this kind of celebration is contagious. Did you ever go to a middle school dance, where the boys and the girls stood in self-segregated groups against the wall of the gym? This is one of the more awkward experiences of human existence. The music would be blasting, but no one would be dancing. It would take a few brave souls cut loose or a couple of kind-hearted teachers to start a line dance to break the ice. After you got enough

warm bodies out there, everyone can forget that others might be watching, and then the dancing really began, and the dance floor erupted in celebration.<sup>5</sup>

The church can be like this, people lining the walls of a dance hall, cuddling up to the structure, wanting and waiting to join those few joyful ones in the middle who are doing the Christ-dance, reenacting the mystery of faith and the birth-death-and resurrection of the everlasting one.

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<sup>5</sup> Illustration from David Forney "Pastoral Perspective," 2 Samuel 6:1-5, 12b-19, Proper 10, Feasting on the Word, additional essays (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2012) pages 2-3.